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ABSTRACT

Public policies towards special needs persons in advanced countries have improved tremendously over the last 20 to 30 years, whether the concept is described as mainstreaming, integration, or normalization. Both educational and family policies are changing, with educational policies emphasizing free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, and family policies considering the family as central rather than tangential to the service delivery system. However, in South Africa, children within each race group are segregated into able and disabled children. Children with severe to profound degrees of disability are excluded from free and compulsory education. School attendance for them depends on the availability of special day or residential schools. The task of soliciting funds for meals and living expenses falls to the child, his/her family, and school personnel. Policy changes are needed to improve special education services; these changes include ending the differentiation of educational rights based on skin pigmentation and adopting a "free education for all" policy. (14 references) (JDD)

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Special Education in South Africa-Who Plays God?

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ABSTRACT: In this paper the world views on critical issues in special education are outlined and their implications for persons with disabilities in developing countries like South Africa are discussed.

Introduction

World views and public policies in Special Education are under continual review. Such reviews and evaluations of educational policies are necessary because they lead to improvements in the education of persons with disabilities. The cornerstone in the public policy towards special education in countries like the United States, India, the Scandinavian countries, and the United Kingdom lies in the philosophy that all individuals have a consitutional right to education (Jangira, 1986; Meyen & Skrtic, 1989). This right to education has been extended to individuals who have disabilities. Prior to this change in the public policy, special needs children were denied access to educational facilities and programs (Yesseldyke & Algozzine, 1982). Children with disabilities in most countries were considered an embarrassment to society; they were not allowed in public; and they were sent to asylums and other institutions where they were neglected and abused. While such neglect has been unduly prolonged in some countries (Jangira, 1986), the policy towards special needs persons in the more advanced countries has improved tremendously.

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The Change

The innovative practices in special education in the more developed countries are related to the philosophy of integration. Various terms are used to describe the philosophy of integration and its practice: mainstreaming in the United States of America, integration in the United Kingdom and normalization in Scandinavian countries. The basic principle is educating children with special needs, as far as possible, in ordinary schools. Integration is the opposite of segregation. Segregation is viewed as the process by which a special group in society is identified and gradually the social and physical distance between this group and the rest of society increases. A feeling of otherness develops in the group which alienates the former group. Integration is the process of bringing together the smaller group back into the larger community (Jangira and Mukhopadhyay, 1987).

When developing countries began to focus on improved quality of life for **all** citizens, they also included the needs of individuals with disabilities. The plight of these special groups of citizens whose quality of life needed much improvement began to gain attention in response to the demand for human rights for all individuals. Over the last twenty to thirty years persons with disabilities, especially in the United States, have demonstrated the incredible ability of the human spirit to triumph over adversity (Martin, 1989). The advocacy for human rights for individuals with disabilities is based on the argument that all human beings have the same right to quality of life. New movements in education emphasize the fact that persons with disabilities have the

same rights as the rest, have equal opportunity for growth and development in environmental conditions availabe to the rest, have access to the quality of life like any other citizen, and are treated as equal partners in the community.

The principle of integration/mainstreaming/normalization has resulted in several legislations which ensure an improved quality of life for individuals with disabilities. In the United States, for example, the federal law (P. L. 94-142) requires that a **FREE AND APPROPRIATE education in the least restrictive environment be provided to all handicapped children from birth onwards**. That means that all children considered to be at risk from birth are eligible for specialized professional services and resources at the expense of the federal government. Students with disabilities have became fully participating members of regular schools and the community. The provision of free education for all children with handicaps in the U. S. is stated in the following extract:

> "No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States,...shall, solely by reason of his/her handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance" (Yesseldyke, & Algozzine,1982, p. 221).

Family policies for children with disabilities in the U. S. are also under continual review. Historically, parents were regarded as scapegoats for their children with disabilities (Kirk & Gallagher,1979);

they were held responsible for the child's condition for one or more reason---genetics, psychological dysfunction or child-rearing practices (Summers,1987). Parents were expected to initiate and maintain special services for their children through private funds for teacher salaries, materials and accommodation (Turnbull & Summers, 1987). In the 1970's parents became more forceful---as advocates they initiated several court cases which eventually led to the passage of the significant legislation mentioned above, namely, P. L. 94-142 (Turnbull, 1986). The revolution in family policy for children with disabilities is in the change of emphasis: hitherto the service delivery system was viewed as the center of the universe with demands on the family to conform to the systems' expectations and standards; **now the family is to be considered central while the delivery system is tangential, playing a supportive role to the family** (Turnbull & Summers, 1987).

The Current Status of Special Education in South Africa

In South Africa, the education policy provides for a differential and unequal budget based on race and colour classification (South African Institute of Race Relations cited in Naidu, 1989). In addition to the separation of races, the children within each race group (for example, Indian Education) are further segregated into "able" and "disabled" children for educational purposes. In some departments education is free and compulsory for children who are not disabled, or for those who have mild disabilities. Children with severe to profound degrees of

disabilities are excluded from free and compulsory education. A clear public policy for these special needs children in this country is lacking. The handbook in the regular schools serves as a guideline to policy issues, but such guidelines are not available for children who are excluded from the public education system on account of their disabilities. There is no public policy for children who attend special schools in this country. School attendance for them is optional and it depends on the availability of special schools for the particular disability. The establishment, management and funding of special schools is a shared responsibility between the welfare agency and the government (Naidoo,1986; Spragins,1985). Funding of these special schools in South Africa is a growing concern for families, professionals, and children with disabilities.

Children who are excluded from regular education have to seek accommodation in special, segregated day and residential schools. In principle, limited funds by way of subsidies are provided by the government for meals and living expenses if children are to live in hostels at special schools. Although the sponsoring welfare bodies are responsibile for providing funds, the actual task of soliciting funds ultimately shifts to the child with the disability, his/her family and school personnel. In effect, a special needs child who lives on the school campus is expected to go hungry unless by some chance or pity a donation is secured by the staff and pupils. Since the competition for charity is increasing, special schools are forced to exploit the child's disability in public to win sympathy and solicit funds. The methods used to raise

funds in special schools cast a poor reflection on the values of society and the degree of our civilization.

Needed Changes in South Africa

Any attempts to improve special education services in South Africa cannot overlook the current policy at two levels, the macro- and micro- levels. At the macro-level, a system that separates nonhandicapped persons for differential citizenship and rights to education on the basis of skin pigmentation is immoral and unpardonable. It has far reaching, negative implications. It leads to poor international relations in educational circles. The academic isolation of South Africa by world authorities is limiting research and educational advancement which ultimately disadvantages the children in this country. For example, the keynote speaker, **Professor Joseph Matarazzo, an international authority from the Council for Exceptional Children, was forced to withdraw from the 1989 conference of the Psychological Association of South Africa because of the unfair and unethical national educational policy in this country (Daily News Reporter, 1989)**. The need for an equitable education dispensation for all nonhandicapped individuals in the country cannot be emphasised any further.

At the micro-level, the separation of children within each race group (for example, Indian Education) into "able" and "disabled" children for educational purposes needs urgent review. Banishing children to remote, dilapidated school settings without adequate services where

social agencies and staff persons spend much of their time updating the plant and technology is not reflective of a civilized society, it is a serious indictment on our values. If children with disabilities are a burden to the mainstream of society, then the idea of Johnathan Swift (author of Guilliver's Travels) would be some solution. Since the wealthy class was embarrassed by the growing number of children who begged, Swift made his "Modest Proposal" in 1729. He suggested that weak and deformed children be processed as canned food for children of the wealthy class in order to save the embarrassment.

If Swift's proposal is repugnant to us, then we need to examine the current policy and advocate for **Free Education for All**. If children with mild disabilities have free education in the regular schools, what is the moral justification for excluding children whose disabilities are relatively more severe? How is an individual who uses reading glasses different as a human being from the one who uses contact lenses or uses braille to read? How does a parent feel in discriminating against his/her children who vary in their capabilities? Who plays God? Who accords or denies human rights to individuals?

In South Africa the issue of free, appropriate and compulsory education in the least restrictive environment for children with all degrees of disabilities needs to be given priority. Legislation by the central government is essential to provide a more humane special education service in the country. Such legislation needs to address the issue of funding, training of personnel, and service delivery.

The need for a public policy to provide special education in South Africa is urgent. The time is ripe for change. But who will advocate change---will it be the education departments, professionals, parents, children with disabilities, or all of them? Who decides on the rights to education? And what will facilitate change: what will be more palatable for breakfast, Swift's proposal or a dialogue about the rights of children with disabilities?

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A note about the Presenter of the proposed paper:

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